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Arms Control: Eager to Please

Although the Senate has mandated President Reagan to report on Soviet arms control violations by Dec. 1, White House Chief of Staff James A. Baker has delayed the report until after next month's talks in Geneva between Secretary of State George Shultz and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko so as not to anger the Russians. To specialists in the Defense Department and CIA, Baker's decision conveyed an attitude of timidity and excessive eagerness to please.

Baker's Shultz-backed delay went through the bureaucratic mill so quietly for only one reason: Pentagon and CIA specialists are too busy trying to prepare a U.S. position for Geneva to engage in heavy bureaucratic hostilities. That also explains the lack of resistance to the imminent appointment of arms control elder statesman Paul Nitze as the president's "special ambassador" and chief negotiator. Although Nitze is widely respected, his tendency to operate and negotiate on his own has raised eyebrows among hard-liners.

The pre-Geneva task of prepping Shultz, whose lack of familiarity with nuclear weapons has surprised Pentagon experts, has proved awesome. It leaves no time for other activities by administration critics of easy-come arms control agreements. These specialists are sweating out separate negotiating concessions on outer-space defense systems, offensive strategic arms and Europe-based intermediate weapons. "They've hit us with incredible time restraints, so much that we can't even move against

delaying the violations report or anything else," a high-level arms-control skeptic told us.

Baker has agreed to let the president send a letter to the Senate with a secret summary of the 19 Soviet violations and a statement that the full report will be sent to Congress on Feb. 1. If then, why not now?

The answer lies in White House sensitivity to endangering a resumption of the arms control process. Delaying the violations report would have seemed unthinkable last September, when the Senate imposed the Dec. 1 deadline. It required the president himself to submit the latest U.S. findings about Soviet noncompliance with existing SALT agreements. That stricture weighed heavily with Baker. He has said privately that the language would give the report presidential sanctity and, as such, would be interpreted in Moscow as a slap in the face. Such sensitivity for Soviet feelings comports badly with the conclusions in the violations report. It lists 12 new and separate violations not included in last January's first-ever noncompliance document issued by any administration, plus seven updates of earlier violations.

Baker's concern not to offend the Kremlin came in the face of the first unambiguous accusation of Soviet violations ever made by a White House official. The president personally authorized Robert McFarlane, his national security adviser, to utter this sentence during CBS's "Face the Nation" on Nov. 25: "We learned that [the] Soviets violate treaties." But Baker, with Shultz's strong advocacy, made a distinction between that outright accusation and the president's signature on the Dec. 1 noncompliance report. One administration insider told us that Baker, surely reflecting Shultz, felt Gromyko would take a Reagan-signed document as a "personal insult" if it got out before Geneva. That suggests failure in the highest levels of the Reagan administration to understand that Andrei Gromyko is going to Geneva for purposes of Soviet policy and not because he likes George Shultz. The Kremlin has repeatedly demonstrated that neither timidity nor insults deflect it from its course.

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